ETHICS

THE STUDY OF ETHICS-AN OVERVIEW

Although most of us are obedient disciples of the values we learnt in childhood, we spend time pondering the importance of these moral rules and how they might lead to a more virtuous life.

Prohibitions against lying, stealing, and cheating for instance, are platitudes/ clichés/truism, to which we pay homage, but we don't always comply with them.

Reason? We lack experience in moral reasoning.

The confession of prominent people about their gay orientation has stunned most of us. These are people who are professionals, and highly regarded in the society. To some, these are role models they have always emulated. Of course serious consequences can be projected after these confessions touching on their reputations, professions et cetera.

Given the kind of society we are living in, did they have to confess? What prompted them to do so? And was the act right or wrong?

In 2003, the readers of the *New York Times* were stunned by a front-page confession of journalist transgression: *Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception.*

The paper gave details of how the 27 year old reporter, Jayson Blair had committed ***journalistic fraud*** in at least half of the articles he had produced as a reporter; who fabricated and plagiarized the stories.

The paper lamented that the widespread ***fabrication and plagiarism*** "represented a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper.

This, however does not represent a true ethical dilemma because dilemma involve moral struggles and reflection in an effort to do the right thing.

Ethical dilemmas engage the conscience, which may respond to two or more competing and morally defensible courses of action. However, Jayson's behavior was indefensible under any standard of responsible journalism.

Ethical dilemmas are all around us. They are woven into the fabric of everyday life, always challenging our ethical sensibilities.

Examples

- Do I accept a music CD from a friend, illegally downloaded from the internet when doing so simply validates my friend's behavior?

- Do I have a duty to report a crime I witness- in the Kenyan situation?
- Is a physician-assisted suicide moral?
- Do musicians have a moral obligation to refrain from using obscene language?

It is easy to provide answers to these questions using our feelings about the issues. But can you defend your decision based upon some established ethical principle?

That is what the study of ethics is all about-learning to justify publicly our ethical choices based upon sound ethical precepts

A course in ethics then, provides the tools for making difficult moral choices, in both our personal and professional lives.

Through the teaching of ethical principles and moral reasoning, educational institutions can fulfill one of their historically important responsibilities**-"the cultivation of morality"**

Definitions

1. **Ethics** is a term derived from the Greek word *ethos* meaning "custom," "usage", or "character."

2. It is a rational process of applying established principles when two moral obligations collide.

The most difficult ethical dilemmas occur when conflicts arise between two 'right' moral obligations.

For instance, a student may promise to remain silent when a friend confides in him/her that he cheated. If a teacher attempts to solicit testimony from that student regarding her friend's nefarious behavior, the student must then weigh the value of loyalty to the friend (a moral virtue) against commitment to the truth (another moral virtue).

3. Ethics, therefore, involves the balancing of competing rights when there is no "correct" answer.

4. Ethics is also defined as a branch of philosophy that deals with the moral component of human life and is usually referred to as moral philosophy.

Morals

Presently, the concept **ethics** is used interchangeably with **morals**. The two concepts have been merged so that they are virtually indistinguishable.

Moral is derived from the Latin *mos* or *moris,* which means “way of life” or “conduct.”

-It is often associated with religious beliefs and personal behavior.

Therefore the strategy of merging the two concepts is useful in the study of media ethics or any other profession because it reflects the growing realization that professional ethical behavior cannot be divorced from the moral standards of society at large.

For example, a PR practitioner who deliberately distorts truth violates a fundamental principle that has its genesis both in the moral systems of various religions and ancient ethical canons.

1. Ethics reflects a society’s notions about the rightness or wrongness of an act and the distinctions between virtue and vice.

For instance, accusing someone of laziness or incompetence is not to accuse that person of immoral conduct. On the other hand, such actions as lying, stealing, and cheating do imply the violation of ethical norms (it is immoral). Thus-

2. Ethics is a set of principles or a code of moral conduct.
3. Ethics involves the evaluation and application of those moral values that a society or culture has accepted as its norms.

However, an individual person can also come up with a personal code of conduct, but the violation of this code does not necessarily raise serious ethical questions.

NB Ethics instruction refines our ability to make critical judgments and to defend those decisions on some rational basis.

For instance, when journalists delve into other people private lives and publishing embarrassing revelations, they justify their action with “the people’s right to know.” However, this defense does not tell us what the people need to know and why the public has a right to this kind of information in the first place.

BRANCHES OF ETHICS

Ethics is divided into three branches:

1. Metaethics
2. Normative ethics and
3. Applied ethics

Metaethics

Is a branch of ethics concerned with the study of the characteristics, or nature of ethics. It also examines the meaning of abstract terms as good, right, justice and fairness.

It also attempts to identify those values that are the best moral values.

Metaethics is not concerned with making moral judgments but instead attempts to distinguish ethical values from those that involve merely matters of taste or attitude.

It provides the broad foundation for ethical decision making, but it does not provide guideposts on how to move from point A to point B.

For instance, when viewers or readers describe a news report as unfair, are they referring to an ethical concern or merely a matter of taste?

Likewise, when a media critic describes a TV series as “good feature” does not necessarily denote any observations concerning the program’s moral stature.

It is the role of metaethics to define such vague concepts in ethical terms, providing precision of meaning so that all members of society can start with a level playing field in reaching moral judgments.

Normative Ethics

Normative ethics is concerned with developing general theories, rules and principles of moral conduct. For instance, the recent demise of the moral fabric in the society is the concern of normative ethics.

These theoretical rules, and principles are the ethical markers of any civilized society, guideposts designed to bring moral order out of chaos.

They provide the foundation for ethical decision making in the real world.

For instance, some societies’ prohibitions against lying, cheating, stealing flow from our concern with normative ethics.

For instance, a media institution’s proscription/prohibition against reporter’s employing deception to get a news story derives from the general societal norm concerning lying. Nevertheless, under deadline and competitive pressures, journalists are sometimes tempted to abandon such broad principles because they truly believe that public interest will served by ferreting out the story, even at the expense of violating a fundamental rule of ethical behavior.

When moral norms are severely ‘tested’ in the real world, they media practitioner enters the practical realm of applied ethics.

Applied Ethics

Applied ethics is the problem-solving branch of moral philosophy/ethics. It uses the insights derived from metaethics and the general principles and rules of normative ethics in addressing specific ethical issues and concrete cases.

For instance, a reporter is asked by a lawyer representing a man accused of murder to reveal the names of the sources of information for an article the reporter has written about the case. The reporter has promised the sources to keep their identities secret. However, the lawyer believes that such information could lead to his client's acquittal.

One rule, or societal norm, in this case suggests that we should always keep our promises, because to do otherwise would violate the trust on which individual relationships thrive.

On the other hand, justice requires that we ensure a defendant a fair trial. In this case, these two abstract principles will collide.

Applied ethics is designed to guide us through this moral dilemma/thicket by confronting issues within a real-world environment.

In applied ethics, there are not always right or wrong answers, but there should always by "well-reasoned" answers to such situations.

Most of us are troubled and preoccupied with our moral existence because we are unable to apply our beliefs to life's numerous ethical dilemmas.

Applied ethics is the vital link between theory and practice, the real litmus test of ethical decision making.

Good examples include professional and occupational ethics.

ETHICAL CONCEPTS

A clear understanding of the terms, concepts and distinctions that people commonly use to express moral or ethical problems and concerns enables us to identify what is ethically significant (or "morally relevant") in a situation. Understanding the ethical significance of the problems we face is the first step in responding well to them.

Understanding ethical terms and language promotes the understanding of ethical situations, the ethical problems that commonly occur, and the possibility of resolving those problems.

Values

A moral value something that is esteemed, prized, or regarded highly or as good. Examples include autonomy, justice, and dignity of human life. These are important to large segments of society.

Objectivity and fairness are often cited as values underlying the practice of journalism. Similarly, trust, integrity and honesty are cherished values for any ethical public relations practitioner.

Values are the **building blocks** of **attitudes**-thus the “learned emotional, intellectual and behavioral responses to persons, things and events.

For example, the attitudes of opponents of physician-assisted suicide may be predicated on such fundamental moral values as the sanctity of life.

On the contrary, the attitudes of those who believe in “a right to die with dignity” are based on such underlying values as individual autonomy and a right to a quality of life.

Moral and Amoral Agents

Acts, agents and the character or motives of agents are the objects of moral evaluation.

A moral agent is the entity whose actions, character and motives can be morally evaluated

For instance a competent and reasonably mature human being is the most familiar example of a moral agent.

However, only certain agents have their acts, character or motives morally evaluated.

For example, a storm may be responsible for human deaths and heavy property damage. Although the storm is the agent of destruction, the actions of the storm are not subject to *moral* evaluation; the storm is not guilty of murder nor the massive destruction.

Amoral agents consist of most "lower" (non-human) animals. Amoral implies that morality is not a factor in their own behavior, and, therefore, questions of morality are not appropriate in evaluating them and their acts.

Moral agents are not necessarily morally good individuals. They can either be moral or immoral, ethical or unethical in contrast to the amorality of most other beings.

Common terms of moral praise for agents include "good," "a person of high moral character," "virtuous."

We also have particular character traits that are praised as moral virtues including "kindness," "honesty," "courage," "bravery," etc

Acts are judged as right and wrong according to three criteria:

i) The **nature of the acts**

E.g., "Murder is wrong;"

ii) The specific **circumstances** of a particular act

E.g. Collin's unprovoked assault on John was wrong;" and

iii) The **motives** with which the agent committed the act

E.g., "Stella's criticism was destructive and motivated by hostility rather than a sincere attempt to improve performance."

Virtues and Vices

Virtues are traits of moral character such as honesty, kindness and responsibility. These are characteristics of people, rather than acts or the consequences of their actions.

Traits of moral character are essential in the development of complex cooperative activities. Social practices achieve ends and produce results for which their practitioners may receive "external" rewards including pay, fame or career advancement.

To understand a person's character, it is important to understand the whole configuration of ethically relevant considerations that influenced his actions.

For instance, knowing that a person often broke the law might lead one to conclude the person is a criminal. However, if you sought to find out the circumstances surrounding his being jailed may reveal something different about the person.

Likewise, if a person's apparent bravery and willingness to risk his life in battle derived mainly from an obsession with killing and maiming people, we would not call that the virtue of bravery, but something of a character defect in a socially acceptable way.

Moral integrity is the ethical coherence of a person's life and actions. People's values may be expected to develop over the course of their life, so moral integrity is not simple persistence in maintaining value commitments. The coherence of a person's life is a narrative coherence. Therefore to understand a person's character and his moral integrity, one needs to understand the person and their history pretty well. Often, this requires understanding both the ethical and religious tradition of that person and his formative life experiences.

A loss of integrity can be forced upon a person. Examples included politicians and workplaces where strife if rife or situations in which a person is called upon to respond to a situation-in which all of the obvious responses threaten to betray some relationship or trust.

This can happen when someone is called upon to make a grave health care decision on behalf of a family member which the decision maker is unprepared to make in a way that he feels the ill person would have wanted.

- **Justice**
- **Responsibility**
- **Trust**
- **Honesty**
- **Etc**

Ethical Communication

The study of ethics would be futile if it did not promote understanding. The understanding can be best achieved by examining any ethical situation from the perspective of the following communication process:

A *moral agent* (communicator) with a particular *motive* commits an *act* (either verbal or nonverbal)within a specific *context* directed at a particular *individual* or *audience* usually with some *consequence.*

Moral agents are the ones who make ethical judgments regardless of whether they are acting on their own volition or as institutional representative. All communicators become moral agents when they confront the ethical dilemmas of their professions and must bear full responsibility of their actions.

An understanding of the role of the moral agent is essential because ethical standards always vary according to social roles.

For example-

Most reporters and editors, because of their roles as agents for the public, cannot in good conscience become politically active because to do so would compromise their independence.

Those who fail to adhere to this journalist axiom quickly fall from grace in the eyes of their employers.

Such was the fate of Sandra Nelson, a reporter for Tacoma, Washington's *News Tribune*, who picketed for abortion rights outside a local hospital and campaigned on behalf of civil rights for gays and lesbians. Despite warnings from her superiors, Nelson

continued her off-duty political activities and was reassigned from her position as education reporter to swing shift/part-time worker.

Ethical decisions are always made within a specific *context,* which includes the political, social and cultural climate. Although the context does not necessary determine the outcome of an ethical judgment, it exerts an influence that cannot be ignored.

In fact, the contextual factors often create the internal conflict that makes us ask ourselves what we ought to do versus the popular thing to do.

We also need to examine the *motives* of the moral agent, because good motives can sometimes justify what appears to be an unethical act.

For example, a reporter may use deception to uncover government corruption, a journalistic technique most of us would tolerate or call creativity.

However, motives should not be examined based strictly on their popularity or public acceptability; they should be viewed in conjunction with the *consequences* of the action.

For instance, national leaders would not be justified in carrying out a genocide policy, even if it were ratified by their constituents.

The *act* is the behavioral component of the communication process. It is what draws our attention to the actions of others and what may lead us to describe their actions as either ethical or unethical.

These acts may be verbal ***like when a reporter lies to a news source*** or nonverbal as when ***an advertiser omits product information vital to informed consumer choice*** e.g skin toning creams containing mercury which causes cancer.

The ethical situation should also be evaluated in terms of the moral agent's relationship to the *individual*(s) or *audience* most directly affected by the ethical judgment.

For instance, a magazine that appeals to a sophisticated audience might feel comfortable with including a quote containing offensive language, whereas a local community newspaper might sanitize/clean such a quote.

Or an advertiser that markets its products to children might employ less aggressive sales techniques than one that appeals to an adult audience.

Ethical judgments produce *consequences*-either positive or negative-for both the moral agent and others who may be touched by the agent's actions. The consequences may range from stimulations of conscience to public approval or disapproval of the moral agent's behavior.

Sometimes, the *consequences may be instantaneous and unambiguous* like when a newspaper reader complains about a graphic photo or when TV viewers complain of showing them video clips of charred bodies.

The cons may also be *long-lasting* and form the foundations of the individual or institutional reputation.

E.g. Martha Karua and Fr. Wamugunda, rapists, Maina Njenga and Mungiki, etc

In an ideal world, moral agents would know the consequences in advance and act accordingly. But too often, the consequences are unanticipated or diverge from the expectations of the moral agent.

E.g. The role played by the media in the 2007 PEV.

Media practitioners need to exercise extreme caution when their actions are likely to result in harmful consequences.

THE VALUE OF ETHICAL EDUCATION

Can ethics be taught? This is a difficult and controversial question to many scholars. There are two schools of thought on this matter:

Cynics-contend that ethics is not a proper subject for study at all, because it raises questions without providing clear answers.

Skeptics-argue that knowledge of ethical principles and norms does not necessarily produce a more moral person. On the contrary, when confronted with real ethical dilemmas, people will ignore whatever wisdom was dispensed in an ethics course and act in their self-interest.

They also argue that children's moral development is completed before they reach school and thus, that such character education classes can have little effect. This view assumes that moral maturity ends at a very early age.

Optimists-that ethics is a subject like math, physics or history, with its own set of problems and distinctive methods of solving them. In this view there is a body of moral knowledge that awaits the ethically inquisitive mind. Thus, the study of ethics is the key to understanding moral conduct and to improving human spiritual condition.

Obviously, ethics cannot be injected with a hypodermic needle. And there are no guarantees that formal instruction in moral philosophy can turn sinners into saints but it is a vital skill to media practitioners and all professions.

Good professional ethics is a cherished commodity and builds respect among one's colleagues.

1. **Moral reasoning/Promotes Moral conduct**

Ethics promotes moral conduct by providing the means to make ethical judgments, defend them and then criticize the results of one's choices-a process called moral reasoning.

2. **Stimulating the Moral Imagination**

A course in media ethics promotes the notion that **moral choices constitute an important part of human existence** and **that the consequences of ethical decisions can lead to either suffering or happiness.**

Stimulating the moral imagination develops an emotional empathy with others that is not elicited by discussing ethical issues in abstract terms. Sometimes, our moral imagination needs gentle prodding or other at other times, it needs shock therapy.

3. **Recognizing Ethical issues**

Training is ethics helps us recognize the ethical implications of the decisions we make; it helps us anticipate ethical dilemmas.

Although most of us believe we can distinguish right from wrong, often times we have been betrayed by our prejudices, selfishness to betray our moral compass.

Example

- Journalists and editors receiving gifts and gratuities from news sources
- When politicians show up during burial ceremonies and steal the show, ignoring the feelings of the bereaved

4. **Developing analytical skills**

The ability to think critically about ethical issues is at the heart of the decision-making process. This process involves examining important abstract concepts such as *justice, moral duty*, and *respect* for others to see how they can be applied consistently and coherently to real-life situations.

Critical examination of the arguments and justifications used to support one's moral decisions is also important.

These skills are also important in problem-solving in mathematics, behavioral science and philosophy.

They also help us understand classroom situations including students' behavior.

5. **Eliciting a sense of Moral Obligations and Personal responsibility**

As moral agents, we need to be accountable for our actions and should not blame others for our ethical lapses.

E.g.

- Media practitioners often emphasize freedom at the expense of responsibility.
- A CEO who sends his deputy to pass on information about unfair decisions he makes.

Under such circumstances, the study of ethics can help redress the imbalance.

6. **Tolerating Disagreement**

In order to make ethical judgments, moral agents need to take into consideration and respect other people's points of view.

A rational decision is based on a defensible moral foundation, ample deliberation and consideration of the available options.

It involves tolerating differences, avoiding labeling opposite view points and eliminating evasions.

It is important to consult the moral views of others before passing our personal judgments.